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9 Always already menstrual activist: elaborations on being activist-scholar

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Introduction

So, I found myself utterly confused. I sat, lips painted red, at a seminar in a fancy house just outside of Gothenburg and was among a selection of specially invited guests from a range of disciplines asked to explore whether academic researchers can or should “also be activists.” In what is now my long-time engagement in both menstrual activism and menstrual scholarly work in sociology – in Sweden and beyond – I have often been asked to discuss – or rather defend – that position, and I have thought, read, written, and talked quite a lot about it. However, that time I could not find the words. The well-known political scientist, who had been asked to get the discussion going, started the seminar by arguing for a hard separation: that scholars should absolutely not be active in society in the field they study, or as he put it; that a political scientist cannot “barge into party summits” and have their say. He suggested that engagement in society in general was important for academics but that we ought to stay away from the subjects we research. He might not have meant it that harshly; perhaps he was mostly trying to get the discussion going, but I lost my footing at the premise. My mind went numb, overwhelmed with questions and thoughts. Around the table colleagues from the humanities, natural and social sciences, representing a range of subjects and perspectives, discussed. Some agreed with him, others argued against him, but it seemed like no one else represented a way of thinking close to my own. It seemed they all thought that activist ambitions were, in fact, problematic for scholars. I remember mumbling something about the questions being incorrectly phrased, feebly insisting that no research is apolitical, and haltingly delivering my personal example with how research in fact can be preceded by and built from activism. But no one seemed to understand what I was saying. They seemed to use the word activist in a caricature sense, as if being activist was equal to being extreme, polarizing, and blazingly biased. They seemed to argue that direct involvement with the field was somehow detrimental to scholarly work. It was like I witnessed their discussion through a thick glass, where I could not quite hear what they were saying, and they could not hear me. I drove home from the seminar with a sinking sensation in my gut. What

had they all really been talking about? What did they even mean by activist? Why could I not find a way into the conversation? Then, about a week or so after, I got angry. That is probably exactly how that political scientist had wanted me to react at the seminar. Better late than never. It angered me that they all had seemed to think that researchers should be so detached. I fumed to colleagues in the lunchroom: Why on earth should we not, as researchers, be actively engaged in the fields that we have been assigned and (state) financed to generate knowledge about? How far up the ivory-tower are these people? If we would indeed stay away from our fields, then how should we be of any use to anyone? What right to exist does academia have if we never get involved? It angered me that they questioned my (and others) proficiency. I fumed: Do they really think that me being activist makes me less of a sociologist? Moreover, it angered me that they seemed to consider personal engagement and personal experiences harmful to “good” science. Have they wilfully ignored scholarly insights for the last 30 years that have led us way past positivist notions of objectivity?

As the years have passed since that seminar, I have gotten less angry, all the while observing a growing need to strengthen my response on the values of activism in academia. In the ongoing so-called academic culture war,¹ we now see not only right-wing extremists but even members of parliament, arguing gender, race, postcolonial, and climate studies to be “excessively activist” and problematically political (Goldschmidt Pedersen, 2021; Meret, 2021; Rahbari et al., 2024). Academia has retorted that such notions distort academic freedom and risk the very foundations of democracy (Nielsen, 2021; SULF, 2024), but the accusation lingers and upholds a false – long ago firmly rejected and unwanted – discourse of some kind of academic absolute objective neutrality. In this moment in time, it is therefore particularly important to elaborate on ways of thinking about activism in academia. In this text, I, from my own experiences of working within the area of menstrual health as scholar and activist, provide a reflection on what I think the many advantages of combining activism and scholarship can be, hoping it can strengthen the counterargument – that scholars indeed both can and should be activists.

Definition

In the early years of my academic work, I spent considerable time and energy trying to understand how to separate “myself as activist” from “myself as scholar.” My activism in menstrual health has continuously been questioned by (some) colleagues and journalists. Although there have been several (feminist) islands of respite, I have had a constant feeling of being a topic of debate, some odd curiosity, feeling that I must defend my position or find a way out of it. Numerous scholar-activists report similar experiences (see, e.g., Collins, 2013; Trauger & Fluri, 2012; Hale, 2001; Rahbari et al., 2024). As I have gotten deeper into my scholarly training, including feminist epistemologies and methodologies, I have grown to allow for a cognitive integration.

Dictionary definitions of the term activist hold that is the use of direct and noticeable action to achieve a result, usually a political or social one (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). With that definition, surely there can be very little social science research that is not understandable as activist to some extent. Feminist, indigenous, and anti-racist scholars have long been at the forefront in efforts to make marginalized knowledges impact social change (Brown & Strega, 2015), and large institutions argue the need for all scholars to be agents for social change. UNESCO's (2018) recommendations on research position the scholar as one who should work for inclusion, equality, and human rights. Therein, as well as in Swedish law (SFS, 1993) and EU strategies (EC, 2020), it is a key part of scholars' role and responsibility to contribute to and cooperate with the society outside campus walls. Many call that activism, others not. The term is used differently by different actors and disciplines, as well as differently in different languages and national contexts.

In Swedish the word *aktivist* – although semantically defined as the English equivalent – has long been used pejoratively, alluding to strongly extremist or radical methods of trying to change society. When I began working with menstrual health, I avoided using the term to describe what I today call activism, as it then seemed somewhat too violent and radical (see Persdotter, 2013). People doing the very same thing in the US seemed to use the term activist much more lightly (Bobel, 2010). In a Swedish national context, notions of activism in academia are clearly contentious. As a telling example, the Swedish Association of University Teachers and Researchers (SULF) recently hosted a public debate with the heading “Academy and activism – taboo or goddamn duty?”² (SULF, 2024), pinning activist scholarship somewhere between an absolute forbidden and a moral imperative. There are many contexts across the globe where the situation seems similar: activism in academia is questioned or cautioned against – and is vigorously defended (Rahbari et al., 2024, Wilson, 2018). In contrast, there are disciplines and research milieus where the term “activist” seems way less controversial. Colleagues of menstrual and other feminist research fields from other parts of the world seem to view activism as a standard and given aspect of their research. They position themselves as having given roles to play in activist communities, participating in protests and demonstrations, doing activist social media, and by without hesitation being directly involved in social movements adjacent to their field of study (see, e.g., Persdotter, 2013; Bobel & Fahs, 2020; Cifuentes Contador, this volume). Colleagues here in Sweden, however, seem to much more carefully avoid using the term to describe their efforts to have their research improve society. Although this might be changing, as some have noted that the concept might be going through a process of de-dramatization in Swedish (SULF, 2024), the term “activist” remains contentious in my local research context, and many others. Although a growing number of scholars generally argue the need for social sciences to more overtly engage outside of academia and acknowledge our political viewpoints (see, e.g., Burawoy, 2014; Romano & Daum, 2018; Santos, 2012; Speed, 2006; Sprague, 2016; Collins, 2013; Wilson, 2018;

Rahbari et al., 2024), many choose less contested titles (as “Public Sociologist” or “Engaged Scholar”). I join those who argue that there is a specific value in the term “activism.” The term demands action, standing firm as a conceptual antidote to the comforts of desktop research. “Get up!” the term requests. “Let’s do something about it!”

A recent article by a group of international and interdisciplinary scholars (Rahbari et al., 2024) presents a broad but excellent definition delineating activist scholarship, or academic activism, as “concerned with integrating academic scholarship with social and political activism,” aiming to use their expertise and platform to engage in social issues actively, arising from criticism against research and academia for “operating in isolated ‘Ivory Towers.’” Academic activism challenges the notion of academics adopting a “detached” and supposedly “neutral” or “objective” stance toward their field and rejects the idea that academics should merely study the world, without actively trying to change it. Academic activism, they argue, bears an advantage and a responsibility to “employ their knowledge and expertise in non-academic projects that aim to improve life and society” (Rahbari et al., 2024, p. 74). Activist-scholars, thus, do not stop at knowledge production but share a commitment to have that knowledge put into use. Although public communication is imperative therein, activist-scholars understand their role outside academia as more than communicative. They understand it as an *engaged* imperative (see Fraser & Honneth, 2003), being an active player in how their results move the world. Moreover, activist-scholars make a *public commitment to a cause* (Santos, 2012). They state openly what and whom they work to help. And there are huge benefits of such transparency. With the public profession of activism, the inevitable biases of the researcher are more systematically scrutinized. Finally, the activist-scholar challenges powers that be. They work within an area of study where injustice and malpractice persist, and they act to change that by actively engaging in struggles for recognition and redistribution (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

Bobel and Fahs have defined *menstrual activism* as “a mobilizing effort that challenges menstrual taboos and insists that menstruators have the support they need to live healthy happy lives” (2020, p. 70). As a menstrual activist-scholar, I thus engage to unearth and meet the misrecognized needs of menstruants and help them – women and others who menstruate – to live healthy, happy, and comfortable lives (see Persdotter, 2020, 2022). I work to unpack and convey marginalized knowledges of what it is to menstruate, and continuously cooperate with actors outside of academia to impact policy, practice, and technologies.

Diffraction

I join the wealth of scholars within, for example, feminist methodologies and philosophy of science who press that there is no such thing as value-neutral knowledge, no such thing as a “modest witness” that can observe the world

objectively from above (Haraway, 1988, 1996, 1997). In feminist critiques of science this is a foundational principle (see, e.g., Asdal et al., 2007). Beginning in the 1980s, feminists who exposed the male dominance in science critiqued the idea of the male researcher as objective, problematizing the impact of their specifically gendered experiences on everything from problem formulation to how they wrote up their results (see, e.g., Harding, 1992; Haraway, 1988; Martin, 2001[1987]; Fox Keller, 1982). The fact that those men thought themselves neutral was highlighted as an epistemological problem and many argued that including women would make for better science (as described by Harding, 1992). Haraway questioned this and underscored the importance of investigating *all* positions; that all involved in the production of knowledge occupy a specific situation, that *always* needs to be scrutinized.

Haraway famously argued that when scholars position themselves as if observing the world with a positivist notion of objectivity, they perform a so-called “God-trick” (1988), taking a god-like position (“a view from nowhere”) presumably without bias and body. Haraway posited that a feminist rendition of objectivity is “situated knowledges” (1988, p. 581); an epistemology that understands knowledge as something produced from certain positions, as “positioned rationality” (p. 590); that all researchers generate knowledge through a view “from somewhere” (p. 591). Thus, it matters who makes the science. It matters what bodies they have, what lives they have lived, what power they hold in the world, and so on. As she put it elsewhere: “It matters what matters we use to think other matters with” (Haraway, 2016, p. 12). Haraway posed that the way forward for academic work is to seriously acknowledge the situatedness of the research(er) and take ethical and political responsibility over how we as researchers actively and partially view and make the world. This implies acknowledging that politics is an integral part of knowledge production, that all researchers are partial, as they view the world through a specific set of eyes. There is no such thing as neat, neutral, objective knowledge; we are all *immodest witnesses* (Murphy, 2012) rather than modest ones. Through this epistemological lens, no scholar can ever be neutral or apolitical. All scholars’ ideals and experiences impact their research.

Haraway argues that knowledge should be made from a *diffractive* (rather than reflexive) multitude of different positions, where the knowing self with all its partiality can join and see together with others in a kind of “critical consciousness” (1997, p. 273), finely attuned to how differences are being created in the world. The diffractive viewpoint acknowledges that everything and everyone involved in research greatly impacts its results. Seeing and thinking diffractively thus implies a self-accountable, critical, and responsible engagement with the world (Geerts & van de Tuin, 2021).

As a counterargument to those waving flags of “excessive activism” in academia, the Harawayian way of understanding knowledge production positions academic freedom as being that which allows multitudes into the eternally collective process of academic work. Therein, all researchers (activist or otherwise) must try to understand how we are entangled with our research, hold

ourselves answerable to how we see and what we do (Haraway, 1988, 1997). We all need to try to craft a process that helps us generate reliable and relevant knowledge, despite as well as because of ourselves. The important question, then, is not whether one can combine scholarship and activism; the question to ask is *how to do it*. The question and the task at hand, then, becomes one about *how* we can take ethical and political responsibility over who we are, what questions we ask, and how we and our results impact the world (see Haraway, 1988). Through positioning myself within activist scholarship in menstrual health, I am made acutely aware and exposed in my situatedness, which demands – much more explicitly than for scholars generally – that I grapple hands on with the scholarly responsibilities of world-making.

Integration

My engagement with menstruation began at a Christmas arts-fair in 2006. I was in my second year of Sociology studies and sold feminist art and crafts to boost income. I'd been drawing feminist illustrations for years, making statements about everything from body-hair and dildos to depression and history books. Sure, I did try to provoke, but the pictures were funny rather than radical, playful rather than punk. However, when I first sold my – now rather infamous – tampon earrings (see Figure 9.1), it was a whole different story. About a hundred miniature clay tampons, dipped in glossy reds and pinks, hung on a pink board with the text “Hang them in your ears instead!” I was excited, but I never anticipated the storm of reactions from people visiting the fair. Suddenly, people crammed around my little stall. Some were just curious,



Figure 9.1 Tampon earring by author (2006). Photographer: Anja Sjögren (2007), used with permission from photographer.

others truly outraged. One old lady came at me fist flying, yelling “Do you call this is art!?” Another looked me deep in the eye and told me in a calm and slow voice to “never stop doing what you do.” Then, after only a few hours I had to take the earrings down, because the other vendors were – probably rightly – worried that the commotion decreased their sales (Persdotter, 2013). As I stood there in astonishment, the earrings under the counter as if they were contraband, I tried to grasp why people had reacted so strongly. The earrings had obviously struck a nerve. Being a sociology student, ethnomethodological methods of making visible invisible norms came to my mind (Garfinkel, 1984). What, I began to wonder, could this tell of the state of women’s rights and position in contemporary Sweden? In comparison with other countries, Sweden often stood out as one of the world’s most gender equal (see, e.g., United Nations, 2022; Martinsson & Griffin, 2016). Yet there were obviously some major persistent inequalities alive and well also in good old Sweden. I realized then what I still firmly adhere to: that it is an outrage that such a large part of so many people’s life – the very issue of menstruation – has so firmly been locked out of public discourse. Making menstrual matters visible has been a key concern of mine ever since.

At the beginning, I felt quite alone in my endeavour. I found very little written on the topic and experienced quite great pushback when I tried to bring it up to fellow feminist activists. Fellow feminist activists would dismiss the theme of menstruation as not being “empowering” enough, as risking reinforcing negative stereotypes of women, and perhaps also because menstruation is related so explicitly to sex rather than gender (see Persdotter, 2013). Menstruation did not have a place even in feminism at that moment in time in Sweden (see Persdotter, 2013). In 2009, I started a blog, anonymously, where I explored the boundaries for my own menstrual shame and ignorance of the theme. People around me started to reach out and tell me their stories of cramps, PMS, and menstrual technologies. When I wore my earrings while out clubbing, or at the university, those who saw what they were would react, and menstruation would burst out of its confinement and take up space in the world. I hoped that with every earring I sold, that would be the case. When I, back then, read Chris Bobel’s (2010) *New Blood – Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*, I realized there were others like me who worked to change oppressive ideas of shame and secrecy of menstruation, all over the world. No less, our struggle had deep roots in the history of the women’s movement, integral to the work of long-ago pioneers of women’s health (see, e.g., Murphy, 2012; Bobel, 2008, 2010; Bobel & Fahs, 2020; Johannisson, 2013). Bobel’s work led me to *The Society for Menstrual Cycle Research*, and I attended my first conference in 2011 (heart pounding), and I found a home and a growing ground. As I basked in the riches of menstrual knowledges, I realized that menses could be a vocation, and even a scholarly one at that. Moreover, I identified a need to develop menstrual activism and knowledges closer to my own home country. The trip to the conference was long and expensive, and most of the participants and the research presented were US-based or Anglo-centric.

A year later, I quit what I had until then pretty much considered my dream job and decided to devote all my energy to menstruation. I began drafting the bylaws for the organization *Mensen – forum for menstruation*, today Sweden's leading menstrual advocacy and education actor, I wrote a master's thesis on menstrual activism in Europe and began collaborating with like-minded people both in Sweden and abroad. In 2013, Sweden suddenly opened to menstruation. American news media declared 2015 “the year the period went public” (Jones, 2016; Gharib, 2015), but in Sweden, periods can be said to have already “gone public” in 2013 (Persdotter, 2014, 2022) when the local popular feminist graphic novelist Liv Strömquist devoted two hours of prime-time national public radio to menstruation. Strömquist presented historical and present-day absurdities of menstrual shame, silence, and secrecy and showed how they were (are) used as ways to discriminate women and menstruants.³ It was an absolute tide-turner. Before that show, I would introduce myself at parties and have people, *literally*, turn their back at me when I described what I was doing. They just left mid-conversation. After that radio-show though, the reactions I got came to be completely different.

Scholarly work was one of many paths I viewed as imperative to mend the epistemological injustices surrounding menstruation. I was accepted to a PhD program in sociology in early 2014. At that time, there was so much going on in the local menstrual activist scene that I had to take part-time leave from the university just to keep up. I and Arvida Byström curated the art show *Period Pieces*, with menstrual art from a range of international artists, with extensive media coverage, long lines at the door, and (barring a couple of online trolls) overall acclaim (Jacobson, 2014). As we stood there, in the midst of the crowd, we could see and hear and feel the shifts in ideas about menstruation and its role in life and society. “I never thought it could be beautiful,” someone said. Others discussed bloody genitals as signs of sexual trauma. People were disgusted, intrigued, surprised, in awe, curious, and everything in between. Henrik Tikkonen has said that “only art has the ability to describe what you cannot understand” (Holmgren, 2022), and we operated somewhere in that space – an exploration of ideas that were going somewhere, but we did not know where. Then, the organization *Mensen* had its first board meeting, and we began to post online, recruit members, draft mission statements, and action plans. National news and social media seemingly exploded with menstruation posts and articles, suddenly covering everything from PMS to the care of endometriosis. I must have been interviewed by more journalists that half year, than during all my other years at the university to date. In Swedish, we call that a “ketchup effect”; first nothing, then everything at once.

Since then, menstruation has really taken its overdue place in the Swedish public sphere. Although there has been some backlash – mainly from far-right conservatives who have used menstrual art as a political weapon – menstruation has a continued high presence in the media, and the menstrual activist community has consolidated and keeps progressing its agenda. Just to give a few examples: menstruation and menopause are by now discussed as an important workplace issue (Cubilla, 2022; Rydström et al., 2019; Akademikerförbundet,

n.d.; IF metall, n.d.), endometriosis national care guidelines have been developed, there are a multitude of long-lived projects developing menstrual education for children, youth,⁴ and adults and global standards for menstrual products⁵ as well as menstrual and menopausal health in the workplace guidelines being developed.⁶

When I started working at the university, I made research rather than activism my top priority. However, I continued working as an activist as much as I was able. In Mensen, I have been chair, co-chair, board member, and election committee member over the years, as well as headed study circles, consulted on educational materials, written op-eds, created social media content, and arranged public workshops and lectures. At the moment of writing, I am part-time employed by the organization to develop guidelines for menstrual and menopause-friendly workplaces. As I have progressed in my scholarly proficiency, I have played an increasingly scholarly role as a menstrual activist. I “[put] my sociological imagination into serving a cause” (Sprague, 2016, p. 210) and try to utilize my specific situatedness as a fertile ground for doing valuable research (Earl, 2017), to create more potentials for more liveable lives (Haraway, 1988). I have designed surveys, developed reading lists, compiled literature reviews, and developed handbooks, checklists, and education materials utilizing a wealth of perspectives from both methodological and theoretical sides. I remain somewhat active in the menstrual art community, although I have not created any pieces of my own during the last decade. I have especially valued how my piece “A glass of red” (see Figure 9.2) – a pair of mannequin legs from which you are invited to pour (and drink!) red wine from its crotch – has toyed with the boundaries of pollution and danger, provoking at the same time disgust, unease, laughter, and deliverance. The piece has been “covered” by a theatre group and live on through them.⁷

Amalgamation

Looking back, my activism and the art that it has included have greatly spurred my sociological imagination and have sharpened and enriched my analytical gaze. Research questions have quaked from entanglements of art, people’s reactions, stories in study circles, and ideas from critical scholarly works (see Persdotter, 2022). Therein, scholarship and activism came into being, and have continued to grow, as two sides of a whole. I am proud to say that my work has managed to shed light on aspects of menstruality that have been belittled or avoided even in activist and critical research contexts prior. It seems I have been able to make visible everyday menstruality in a more explicit and thorough way than others have before me (see review by Mørk Røstvik, 2022). That was made possible by my specific combination of experiences, as much through art and bylaws as from survey questions, theories, and interview transcripts.

Within the questioning of whether scholars should be activists, there is a problematic dichotomization of scholarship and activism that engenders a stereotyping that caricatures both: the scholar becomes a beige passive bore



Figure 9.2 Installation “Ett glas rött” by author (2013). Photographer: Karolin Knutsson (2014), used with permission from photographer.

and the activist a crazed angry rebel. I have very seldomly encountered any of those creatures in real life. The menstrual activists that I meet are often just as interested as scholars – if not more – in reliable and up-to-date data and complexities in problems. They (we) study or work at the university, read research, conduct surveys, interview scholars, and cooperate with them (us). This is a well-reported aspect of a lot of activism in today’s knowledge society in general and in relation to health issues in particular (see, e.g., Epstein, 1995; Landzelius, 2006; Rabeharisoa et al., 2014; Lindén, 2021a, 2021b; Persdotter, 2013; Bobel & Fahs, 2020). Therefore, I argue, that there is no clear distinction, no real either/or but rather activism and scholarship overlap. Relatedly, my activist ambitions do not disqualify me as researcher, nor does it somehow relieve me of my scholarly skills and aims. Although activist, I still have years of education and training in sociological methods, I can still perform systematic and rigorous analysis of data, and I remain careful and reflexive in my interpretations. I do not zigzag between the two or opt out of the one to do the other. I am *both* a scholar *and* an activist.

In critical menstruation studies and menstrual research generally, activism is a given (if not inevitable) part of research. Choosing to do the research has for many been an activist choice, the subject often being belittled and stigmatized in our respective research milieus (Owen, 2022; Frisk et al., 2023). The research field has long enjoyed a close connection with activist communities, as has of course feminist/gender/women-studies generally (Bobel, 2010,

2020). Activists have often been acclaimed for their role in identifying epistemological injustices and advancing boundaries of knowledge as they spur new lines of scientific inquiry by bringing attention to problems that have been unrecognized, under-researched, and undervalued (see, e.g., Brown & Strega, 2015; Fricker, 2007; Hauswald, 2018; Sprague, 2016). It is a case in point that in the case of menstrual research, it is difficult to distinguish whether it was activists or scholars that got the ball rolling. To state some concrete examples, activists and scholars have *in tandem* progressed research of queer and trans experiences of menstruation (see, e.g., Bliss, n.d.; Bobel, 2010; Chrisler et al., 2016; Berg, 2017; Frank, 2020; Rydström, 2020), of crip-studies of menstruation (Steward et al., 2020), as well as research on the contents of menstrual products (see, e.g., Reame, 2020; Vostral, 2011, 2018). Activists and scholars in the area of menstruation share epistemic interests (Hauswald, 2018) of expanding knowledges about menstruation as well as the overall goal to make life better for menstruants (see Bobel & Fahs, 2020). My own research has, indeed, been greatly inspired by what activists in Mensen, Menssäkrad,⁸ the architect-scholar-activist Clara Greed (2010, 2016, 2019), and activist-journalist Anna Dahlqvist (2016) have done to highlight the need to take menstruation into consideration in bathroom design in schools and workplaces in Sweden. I have been inspired by artists – who are also activists and scholars in varying degrees – such as Jen Lewis,⁹ Judy Chicago,¹⁰ Miriam Wistreich,¹¹ Ingrid Berthon-Moine,¹² and Arvida Byström,¹³ who have challenged me to think about menstrual substances, personal hygiene, bathrooms, dirt, and disgust in new ways. And vice versa; my research has inspired some of them, and I hope it will continue to do so. There are no clear lines between us. We follow each other on social media, attend the same conferences, co-organize events, attend each other's lectures, read each other's texts, some of us even co-author op-eds, and apply for funding together.

Valuation

Being both a scholar and an activist has its advantages and its drawbacks. Though difficult to distinguish between the two – as discussed above – I will share three examples below that illustrate central aspects of how my activism has impacted my scholarship in sometimes tricky, but always rewarding ways. I have chosen these examples as they span key aspects of research: problem formulation, access to data, and, last, the intricacies of analysis of that data.

First of all, it is safe to say that had it not been for my years of activism prior to the research, I would never even have thought menstruation worthy of scholarly pursuit. Notably, I realized the sociological relevance of the subject early on in my own work as an artist, through reading activist-scholarly work about other activists (Bobel, 2010), and by meeting and working with other (more or less scholarly) activists and (more or less activist) scholars. Later, as I formulated my first research proposal, I drew from years of activist experiences in terms of research questions, methods, and literature. My years as

activist gave me a very concrete head start and provided cognitive and practical tools to produce valuable and innovative research. As so many people had told me of their menstrual lives, I did not only carry with me my own menstrual experience but a chorus of others, already from the get-go. There could, of course, theoretically have been value in starting out with a “clean slate,” but as I have personal experiences of menstruating, I think that also having other people’s voices with me meant that I entered the field with a broader view – to some degree with more sets of eyes to view the world through. Thereby, I think that my years of activism gave me a position to do research that went deeper than it would have otherwise. On the downside, my activist activities (both before and during my research career) have likely also limited possible research questions. For example, due to my vocal critique of certain menstrual product companies, I have to live with a likelihood that I might not be able to gain the same access to these companies as (less publicly critical) scholars might. Although I do think that a laboratory study of pad designing and engineering would be very valuable, I think I must leave that to others to pursue (see Vostral, 2018, 2020; Mørk Røstvik, 2022 for such examples).

Second, I have often as a researcher built from activist infrastructures. I have used words created at menstrual activist events. I have utilized activist social media venues, some of which I personally once set up, to recruit research interlocutors. That gave me the opportunity of reaching thousands of people that were probably more likely to share in-depth details on menses than most. Had it not been for (mine and others) activism they would not have existed. Naturally, using those channels was a choice that had consequences. It meant that my data represented a special segment of the population, and that I had to analyse them accordingly. For example, I explored what aspects of menstruation were difficult even for the uncommonly open to talk about. Although they could comfortably describe everything from menarche to menstrual sex, some of them haltered when the questions regarded the “gory,” “slimy,” and “smelly” aspects of menstruation. Eventually, I ended up studying just that. As all researchers do, I made certain choices with the knowledge and tools available, generated certain data, and interpreted the data in relation to its whole – what was (un)said, how it was collected, by whom, when, and so forth. Furthermore, I have been able to use those same venues for sharing my results to an interested public.

Third, being a scholar-activist has elevated my reflexivity and transparency. When I initially started to interview interlocutors, I thought I ought to keep quiet about my activist position as I worried it might interfere with their narratives. This was naïve for several reasons. Due to my mass-media presence and my choice of recruitment strategy, many of the participants knew who I was before they replied to the call. I found it quite awkward at first as my ideas of how a scholar ought to be clashed with reality, but it also served as an excellent reminder of my (the researcher’s) inevitable presence in and impact on the field. It enforced the importance of including myself as part of the analysis, considering my own impact – as both researcher and activist – on how interlocutors

talked, what they talked about, and so forth. One cannot extract oneself from the equation. It has truly been uncomfortable and difficult – but it has also been immensely rewarding. In order to understand my own role, I have in part utilized auto-ethnographic tools – such as auto-interviewing (Boufof-Bastick, 2004) – but foremost I have utilized the collegial systems integral to academic work. Through sharing data and tentative analysis with colleagues since the very first stages of the research, I have been able to see my empirical material – and myself – through the eyes of others, creating perhaps something like that multiple diffractive view that Haraway (1997) describes. Moreover, the inherent transparency of values that comes with being an activist-scholar has meant that I have likely received a higher degree of scrutiny than many others. In most cases that scrutiny has been part and parcel of a collective process of academic work, and it has improved my research greatly. Other times, like when the mere relevance of my subject has been questioned from other scholars (see Persdotter, 2022) or by far-right debaters, it has been less constructive. However, it is always an immensely valuable thing – and a fundament of scholarly work – to be questioned, critiqued, and challenged. It progresses thought, deepens analysis, and pushes us to do research that matters.

Conclusion

As social sciences, and critical social sciences in particular, are increasingly under attack for being “excessively activist,” it is easy to opt for avoiding any association with, and try to distance research from, activism. However, the ambition to engage actively as scholars and to stand up for the marginalized and deprived is more important now than ever. More of us scholars should find ways of being activists. We have an immensely important role to play also outside the confines of peer-reviewed journals. For some of us scholars of women’s health, at this moment in time – thinking not least of the current situation around defunding of research on women’s health, about the violations to rights to abortion and of trans rights (see, e.g., Thoreson, 2025; Oldroy et al., 2025) – being activists is perhaps even a requirement. We must take seriously the value in our roles as intellectuals, consider how we can impact the societal debate within our fields of study, and recognize and elaborate how we can contribute with our perspectives, skills, and resources. We all, both as individuals and as institutions, need to improve the ways in which we can both be scholarly while also being active parts in our fields. This menstrual scholar and (health) activist sees the benefits of such daily. Being an activist makes me a better a scholar, and being a scholar makes me a better activist.

That does not mean that I think that scholars should, as it were, “barge into party-summits.” Such would indeed be a violation of democratic principles and an abuse of power. It might however mean that we do attend those party-summits. It might mean that we write op-eds in relation to it, and that we come prepared and well read on relevant research and up-to-date data. We

should not be there, or anywhere else where our research matters, as passive bystanders nor crazed maniacs but still as active contributors. To, by principle, retract from these contexts is nothing but a grave misuse of power.

Notes

- 1 “The academic culture wars” refer to ideological conflicts within academia over issues such as free speech, diversity, equity, inclusion, and the role of social and political values in shaping research, teaching, and institutional policies (see, e.g., Holmberg & Selberg, 2022; Marris, 2024).
- 2 Original title in Swedish was “SULF 40 år: Akademi och aktivism – tabu eller förbannad skyldighet?” Available on <https://sulf.se/en/sulf-play/seminarium/sulf-40-ar-akademi-och-aktivism-tabu-eller-forbannad-skyldighet/>.
- 3 The term *menstruant* is used to underline that not all women menstruate and not all who menstruates are women (see Persdotter, 2022; Bobel, 2010; Chrisler et al., 2016; Berg, 2017; Frank, 2020; Rydström, 2020; Vostral, 2018).
- 4 See Liv Livmoder (<https://livlivmoder.se>) and Mensen (<https://mensen.se>), respectively.
- 5 ISO/TC 338 Menstrual products <https://www.iso.org/committee/8933440.html>.
- 6 ISO/CD 45010 Menstruation, menstrual health and menopause in the workplace – Guidance <https://www.iso.org/standard/64365.html>.
- 7 <https://www.gp.se/teater-tamauer-mens.3a804594-741a-41b1-8319-c9ad84811a1>.
- 8 The company Menssäkrad (previously an activist project) works to make menstrual products accessible in public bathrooms <https://www.menssakrad.se>.
- 9 The artist Jen Lewis’ work is discussed in Lewis 2020 and can be found at <http://www.beautyinblood.com>.
- 10 See “Menstruation Bathroom” (1972) here: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/chicago-menstruation-bathroom-from-womanhouse-p15228>, and “Red Flag” (1971) here: <https://judychicago.com/gallery/early-feminist/ef-artwork/>.
- 11 Some of Miriam Wistreich’s work can be found at <https://www.miriamwistreich.net>.
- 12 Some of Ingrid Berthon-Moine’s work can be found at <https://www.ingridberthonmoine.com/work/older-work>.
- 13 One explicitly menstrual series of photographs by Arvida Byström can be found at <https://www.vice.com/sv/article/kwn34w/there-will-be-blood>.

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